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# President may have been the only one left in dark

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WASHINGTON — President Reagan may well have been the only top administration official unaware that fired National Security Council aide Oliver North was helping the Nicaraguan rebels, even though North usually sought presidential approval for his actions.

That lack of presidential awareness of what his staff was up to is perhaps a principal conclusion in the Tower Commission's report on the Iran-contra affair.

Reagan told the commission he did not know that North had engineered the diversion of profits to the rebels from arms sales to Iran or that "the NSC staff was engaged in helping the contras."

Reagan's assertion that he was unaware of the contra activities, in particular, clashes with the perceptions, recollections, documentation and testimony from nearly everyone else in the NSC, the White House, Vice President George Bush's office, the CIA, the Pentagon and North himself.

The report, for example, contains three memorandums prepared by North in which the ex-NSC staffer discusses presidential approval or knowledge about his contra-related plans.

The most important of the memos is an undated, unsigned one entitled "Release of American Hostages in Beirut" that North apparently wrote April 4, 1986, to his boss, then-national security adviser John Poindexter.

Known as the diversion memo, it says in part:

"The residual funds from this transaction are allocated as follows:

"\$2 million will be used to purchase replacement TOWs [missiles] for the original 508 sold by Israel to Iran for the release of Benjamin Weir. This is the only way that we have found to meet our commitment to replenish these stocks.

"\$12 million will be used to purchase critically needed supplies for the Nicaraguan Democratic Resistance Forces."

At the end, the memo, the only official document that directly links Iran and the contras, requests approval by the president. The Tower report, however, said it found no evidence that Reagan saw the memo.

The report also reprinted a May 16, 1986, message from North to Poindexter suggesting that North believed Reagan knew of his actions.

"The President obviously knows why he has been meeting with several select people to thank them for their support for Democracy in CentAm," North wrote. "Democracy in CentAm" appears to be a reference to North's contra supply network code-named Project Democracy and Democracy Inc.

A third memo published in the Tower report, also from North, suggests that Reagan was briefed on plans for a \$100,000 legal defense fund for a captured American airman in Nicaragua, Eugene Hasenfus, who belonged to North's network.

The report noted that North's activities did not run counter to Reagan's policy of aiding the contras because they were meant to "achieve an important objective of the administration's foreign policy."

## Reagan assurances

Although the report did not mention it, in April 1985 Reagan made the following statement at a news conference when asked if he would consider abandoning the contras because Congress opposed his contra aid requests: "We're not going to quit and walk away from them, no matter what happens."

Except for Reagan, virtually all the government witnesses interviewed by the Tower panel recalled knowing of or collaborating with North in his activities as virtual contra commander in the White House.

Even Reagan's own spokesman, Marlin Fitzwater, told The Miami Herald that he knew North was the administration's contra man.

"Everybody in the Western world knew that Ollie North was helping the contras. Everybody in Washington knew that," Fitzwater said in a telephone conversation Nov. 29 when he was still Bush's press secretary. Fitzwater had no further comment Saturday.

A review of the evidence cited in the Tower report confirms Fitzwater's perception, and some

of its documents show that other high-ranking officials beyond the White House appeared to be not only aware of but also willing to participate in North's activities.

They included Poindexter, his predecessor Robert McFarlane and some of their aides; then-CIA Director William Casey, acting CIA Director Robert Gates and some of their subordinates; Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger; Gen. John Vessey, chairman at the time of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; Gen. Paul Gorman, then-commander of U.S. forces in Central America; Secretary of State George Shultz's executive assistant Charles Hill and Assistant Secretary of State Elliott Abrams.

## Intelligence data

Here are some examples:

In a November 1984 memo from North to McFarlane, written less than a month after Congress cut off aid to the contras, North advised that he gave contra leader Adolfo Calero intelligence data provided by Gorman and Robert Vickers, the CIA national intelligence officer for Latin America. North said Calero had requested the information for a plan to attack and destroy Soviet helicopters in Nicaragua.

In a memorandum to McFarlane dated April 11, 1985, North expressed concern that remaining contra funds would soon be insufficient and advised that efforts be made to seek \$15 million to \$20 million in additional funds.

Asked by the Tower board about the source of such funds, McFarlane indicated in a written response that "without solicitation" a foreign official had offered \$1 million a month from what he described as "personal funds."

McFarlane wrote that, at his request, North provided the numbers of a contra bank account in Miami and that later the foreign official doubled his contribution to \$2 million a month, a fact confirmed by two other U.S. officials aware of the matter: Weinberger and Vessey.

Although no one is certain, some congressional sources believe this foreign benefactor was King Fahd of Saudi Arabia. The Saudia Arabian government has consistently denied giving money to the contras.

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Messages from North found by commission investigators in the NSC's computer system show that at one point North was negotiating with the CIA to persuade it to purchase \$4.5 million in "assets" he had accumulated in helping the contras during the congressional prohibition.

The messages suggest that CIA officials, including Casey, were aware of the secret system and that the CIA appeared interested in a deal since Congress was about to allow the CIA to resume management of the contra aid program.

### **\$4.5 million in assets**

"We are rapidly approaching the point where the Project Democracy assets in CentAm need to be turned over to CIA," North wrote to Poindexter in July 1986.

"The total value of the assets (six aircraft, warehouses, supplies, maintenance facilities, ships, boats, leased houses, vehicles, ordnance, munitions, communications equipment and a 6,520 [foot] runway on property owned by a PRODEM [Project Democracy] proprietary) is over \$4.5 M.

"You should be aware that CIA has already approached PRODEM's chief pilot to ask him where they [CIA] can purchase more of the C-135K ... The chief pilot told them where they can get them commercially from the USAF as excess — the same way PRODEM bought them under proprietary arrangements."

Poindexter replied: "I did tell Gates that I thought the private effort should be phased out. Please talk to Casey about this. I agree with you."

The chief of the CIA Central American Task Force told the board that after Congress cut off contra aid in October 1984, "it was Ollie North who then moved into that void and was the focal point for the administration on Central American policy until fall 1985."

A CIA officer who worked

closely with North in directing air drops from Costa Rica last year told the panel that the contra supply network was "controlled by Lt. Col. North."

Abrams said he and Hill, the Shultz aide, discussed what to do with a \$10 million contribution for the contras from Brunei in 1986 and decided to have Brunei deposit it in a North account in Switzerland.

The day Hasenfus' plane was shot down over Nicaragua, other NSC staffers dealt with the matter because North had left for Frankfurt, West Germany, on an Iran-related mission, but they also revealed some knowledge of what was involved.

Robert Earl, North's immediate supervisor, sent the following note to Poindexter Oct. 5: "One of the Democracy Inc. aircraft apparently went down on a resupply mission to FDN forces in the north."

In the end, the Tower inquiry report concluded that while North worked largely in isolation because his superiors rarely, if ever, reviewed his work, it was a different story on his contra supply network. He constantly advised his superiors, McFarlane and Poindexter, of his plans and actions.

And while everybody else seemed to know what North was up to, the president was the only one kept in the dark, the report suggests.